



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Larry Gallo

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

OYE YAA-ANNA: Today I'm here with Mr. Larry Gallo, and it's Thursday, May 21, 2009 and this is part of the Eastern Market exhibit and project. And Mr. Gallo is a long-time vendor with the Market and he will be sharing some light on his activities and just tell us where we see ourselves going. So welcome, Mr. Gallo. Now, how long have you been at the Market?

GALLO: How about if I just give you some background on myself to get there? I came to Washington in 1974, have lived on Capitol Hill since then. So that's about 35 years. I've always lived within a few blocks of Eastern Market, and I've always been a customer of Eastern Market since my very first arrival in the city. I worked in the government for about 15, 20 years, and decided that I wanted to leave that work and pursue my interest in arts and craft making. I did an internship with a silversmith to learn the process and decided to make and design jewelry, and there was no place that was more reasonable and rational and appropriate for me to sell my work than Eastern Market. So along with me being a customer there, I became an exhibitor there doing my own hand-crafted jewelry work in 1992. So I've been a craftsman at the Market for 17 years.

OYE YAA-ANNA: Wow. Does that surprise you?

GALLO: Yes, it does surprise me [laughs].

OYE YAA-ANNA: You mean the jewelry making?

GALLO: I've been designing and making my own jewelry designs, mostly out of metal and semi-precious stones, and a lot of people know my work because I incorporate ancient coins in my jewelry designs—Roman, Greek, Middle Ages coins—that I make settings for. And I make a lot of earrings and pendants and rings and cufflinks and, as I said, I've been selling that work at Eastern Market for 17 years. So I've seen a lot of the evolution of Eastern Market as a place of business both from the point of view of an early customer and as a long-time exhibitor there.

OYE YAA-ANNA: Now, where were you when you heard about the fire?

GALLO: Well, I live about six blocks from the Market, and I got a call from one of the city agency people that I know saying that there was a report of a fire at Eastern Market, so I walked over. It was early, early, early in the morning, still dark, and the building was totally engulfed in flames. It was a place where I had earned my living for 15 years, and so it was a tremendously heartbreaking thing to see the Market building burning, and a lot of things went through my mind, not the least of which was the effect

it would have on all the other people that make a living at the Market—and also my own self and how it might change. So it was tremendously difficult to see the building going up in flames.

OYE YAA-ANNA: Did you lose supplies? Did you store your supplies in the Market?

GALLO: No, I did not. I have always been an outdoor vendor and I've never done any business work inside the building, so in that respect I wasn't impacted. But there were lots and lots of other people who were, particularly the food merchants, who I've been friends of for 30 some years. [They] were watching their livelihoods go up in smoke. It was interesting because a lot of the community were out watching the building burn and I saw a lot of the people crying. To see that ... And there were several of the then-South Hall food merchants who'd been there, some of them, for generations as well. I don't know how they heard about the fire, but they were there and everyone I saw was in tears to see this beautiful old historic building that has become so important to the whole Capitol Hill community and the city engulfed in flames. So it was very heart-wrenching.

OYE YAA-ANNA: So your business has changed since then.

GALLO: Well, as a business person of the Market and as a resident and a Capitol Hill person of so many years, I was really impressed with the way the city responded to fixing the building. The day after the fire, the mayor was outside of the building with the firefighters, thanking them for their efforts to try to save it. He promised to rebuild it the next day. He was joined with a number of Capitol Hill community leaders, including our Councilman Tommy Wells, who also was very devastated by the fire, I think, and who pledged to do whatever he could to make sure that the building would be rebuilt and that business activities would be able to continue there. So within a week, I felt pretty good that maybe something good would become of this, and as time went on, we actually returned to the Market as the outdoor market was organized. The Seventh Street in front of the Market was immediately closed on the weekends and everybody moved out onto the street. Unfortunately, it took a long, long time for customers to realize that, in spite of all the news reports that they heard that Eastern Market burned, there still was a business going on at the Market and, yeah, it had a significant impact on business activities at the Market even through the present day.

So, I also am a member of the Eastern Market Community Advisory Committee. The EMCAC is a community group that has oversight and advisory responsibility relating to Eastern Market, to the city, and whomever the Market manager is. I represent the outdoor vendors, the art and craft and flea market vendors on the EMCAC, and I've been on the EMCAC for more than nine years. So as an EMCAC member, I had a lot of insight into the Market operations before the fire and the plans for restoring the Market after the fire. I like to think that being a member of the EMCAC helped to provide a perspective

to the policy makers and the city government, a perspective from business, from arts businesses at the Market, and I think I was able to contribute to the plans for rebuilding the Market. So I'm grateful that I've been able to be a member of the EMCAC and have some impact on the rebuilding the Market and the future of Eastern Market, both as a community treasure and as a place of business for a lot of people.

OYE YAA-ANNA: So how about your customers? Have the customers returned? Some merchants have observed that the level of customer traffic that you had before the fire—you've not been able to go back to that period.

GALLO: Yes, that's true. Before the fire, I had 15 years' worth of business experience under my belt at the Market and, in fact, the business at the Market has grown every year since I've been there. And in fact, going back 15 years, we had weekend activities which consisted of the Saturday arts and crafts market and the Sunday flea market managed by Tom Rall, who'd been doing that work for more than 20 years. When I first came to the Market as an exhibitor, the South Hall food merchants weren't even open on Sundays, although we had a large art and craft or a large flea market set up at the Market on Sundays. Probably five years ago—maybe 1997, I guess—the food merchants realized that they were missing an opportunity on Sundays by not being open, and they opened the South Hall on Sundays to take advantage of the fact that the flea market on Sundays had begun to draw large crowds to the Market. So I do believe that Saturdays and Sundays—and I'm sure that every other business at the Market, both food and farmers and nonfood vendors, will agree—that the weekends were the busiest time at the Market. Clearly, that's when so many customers come to the Market.

And as I said, every year you could see an increase in business activities. In fact, the year 2007—which was when the fire occurred, the fire was April 29, two years ago, really, overnight into April 30—for me, the beginning of the first quarter of that year was the busiest I have ever been. And that immediately fell because of the fire. So all in all, the year 2007 probably ended up being the worst year for my business activities at the Market because of the fire. I still don't think that the Market is operating at its pre-fire peak. I and the other artists and crafts people who are part of the outdoor market on the weekends probably get the most direct, face-to-face interaction with Market customers, with visitors and customers who come to the Market to buy food, look at the arts and crafts, look at the flea market. We probably get the most direct face-to-face interaction with the largest percentage of the customers. And I still have people who say, "Oh, I thought the Market was burned and that nothing was going on here."

OYE YAA-ANNA: After all this time?

GALLO: After all this time. So, that tells me that, yeah, there's still a lot of people out there who believe that Eastern Market really isn't functioning.

OYE YAA-ANNA: So your customers have come from all over the world, the city

GALLO: Absolutely. For my business, which sort of has a little bit of an international flavor with Roman and Greek coins, I have customers from all over the world. Eastern Market is several things. One, it is the heart of the Capitol Hill community. And the people that I see every weekend at the Market and have become friends with mostly are residents of Capitol Hill and they come to the Market probably as often as every weekend to do their shopping, to visit their friends, to meet their neighbors, to walk their dogs, to bring their children. The strongest support comes from the Capitol Hill community. We get a lot of visitors and customers from the city as a whole, people who come from all quadrants of the city. Many of them take the subway to get to Eastern Market. And customers come from the entire region, from the Maryland and Virginia suburbs. They come to the Market for all the same reasons, food and art and gifts, socializing. So it is a unique place in all of the Washington metropolitan area where there is a regular base of customers who visit pretty frequently and take advantage of all the things that the Market has to offer. It's also very unique in that it is to my knowledge the only venue in the whole metropolitan area where artists, true artists and crafts people like myself, can actually have a regular place to sell your work. It's unique in that regard, as well. And people from all over the area recognize that. They come to Eastern Market to look at art and handcrafts, as well as to buy food.

OYE YAA-ANNA: That makes it really unique.

GALLO: The truth is that Eastern Market also is a visiting place for people from out of town and visiting often from around the world. There are a few tourist guides that list Eastern Market, and that helps out of town people find the Market. A lot of it is word of mouth. Local people who have visitors from across the country, from around the world, bring them to Eastern Market to show them ...

OYE YAA-ANNA: To show off, it's a showplace.

GALLO: And in fact, Eastern Market, more than any place that I'm aware of in the region, is very similar to the historic outdoor markets of Europe. Virtually every town and village in Europe has a weekly market of some sort, food or a flea market. And you think of London and you think of Paris and you think of Rome ...

OYE YAA-ANNA: Vienna ...

GALLO: Exactly. And the Christmas markets in that season. Eastern Market comes as close to a European-style market as I've ever across this country and that is an attraction for people from around the world—that it sort of feels a little bit like home, that they can come out and look around and see ... So it has a tremendous amount of appeal. It is a unique place. But I still think there has been an ongoing impact

from the fire related to patronage and customers of the Market. The fact that the building has been a construction site for two years probably hasn't helped. That is unavoidable, and the end result of it we'll see very soon will be very tremendous, but it still has had an impact on business. And I can only believe that when the building is finished—when it is renovated into a historic, 21st century facility, keeping its historic roots, when the street market is re-established, operating in the European way—when the word gets out that Eastern Market is reopened and revitalized, I can only hope that more and more people will come to the Market to see it, to experience it, and to shop there.

OYE YAA-ANNA: But have you come with any unique ideas or plans—how do you plan to go after customers?

GALLO: We've had a problem with management. Prior to the fire, the Market was managed by an entity, Eastern Market Ventures, that really didn't know a whole lot about operating a fresh food market and had absolutely no knowledge or experience of operating an outdoor arts and crafts or flea market. Eastern Market is governed by a city law that was passed in 1998 and that law protects Eastern Market as a historic building, it protects the business activities that go on at the Market, it lays out a method of managing Eastern Market. And unfortunately, that law up until the beginning of this year was never fully implemented because there was never an overall management entity at Eastern Market. The management was divided between the Eastern Market Ventures that managed the food operations in the South Hall before the fire, and the farmer's line, and then John Harrod, who operating the Market 5 Gallery managed the outdoor Saturday market, and Tom Rall, who operated the Sunday flea market.

So there was never an overall, consistent management of the Market. And we suffered for that, I think. The ostensible market manager who was in charge of the Market the night of the fire happened to be on vacation when the building burned, and he didn't come back for two weeks. So the mayor and his office and Tommy Wells and his council stepped in and communicated with the community and with the vendors about what was going to happen at the Market. But there was no management there at all, which was unbelievable. And eventually that market manager lost his job and someone else came in—and they were even less competent, and so for 18 months out of the last two years, we've really not had any management at the market to speak of. Yeah, the temporary building was put up and, yeah, the lights were turned on and the water was on, but other than that, there was really no management presence at the Market.

At the end of last year, the contract with Eastern Market Ventures finally expired, and at the same time the operations for the Saturday arts and crafts market and the Sunday flea market were all joined together under a single market management entity, which is what the law originally envisioned way back in 1998.

The city put out a Request For Proposals for a new market manager, there was months and months of back and forth. I was privy to a lot of that back and forth as a member of the EMCAC. In the interim period, starting January 1, the city Office of Property Management appointed a temporary market manager, one of their staff, Barry Margeson, and he worked to bring all the entities of the Market under one management umbrella. To my mind, very unfortunately, in I guess the end of March, beginning of April, the city announced that they were canceling the RFP for a new market manager and that OPM would continue to manage the Market for the foreseeable future. So this market manager that OPM appointed from their staff on an interim basis became pretty much the permanent market manager. And that in my mind was very unfortunate for the future of the Market because I believe that the Market is desperately in need of professional, experienced management, particularly during this period of reopening and re-establishing the outdoor markets. And what we have is a city bureaucracy managing the Market. So as of this date, there's no budget for operating the Market, there's no business plan for the future of the Market. There are some plans being made for the reopening at the end of June, there are some plans that I've heard of being made for the summer into the fall, but we have a government bureaucracy managing the Market, which I think is very unfortunate.

OYE YAA-ANNA: It is.

GALLO: And truly, there's no other farmer's market, art and craft market in the country that's managed by a government agency. And that creates a set of issues that make it really, really difficult to plan for the future because the city government is in an economically challenging bind, there's no money, according to the city, for doing any long-term planning. Granted, we are opening the new building on time and on schedule, and it's going to be beautiful. But I don't see a whole lot of planning or preparation for down the road. Where is the business plan for Eastern Market? We need a business plan. A business plan needs to have a very specific budget of revenues and expenditures. We need to have a plan for outreach, for advertising and public relations. We need to have a plan for utilizing the brand new North Hall. The North Hall of Eastern Market was never much of anything. It never had any running water, never had any bathrooms. Now it's renovated into a state of the art facility

OYE YAA-ANNA: With running water and bathrooms?

GALLO: There are, I think, twelve bathrooms being added to Eastern Market right now. Yes, twelve. And upgraded electricity, air conditioning, heating. There never was any air conditioning in the whole building, and only the North Hall was heated, the South Hall was never heated. No, only the South Hall was heated, not the North Hall. So my point is here is a whole new aspect of the Market that we've never had before—a viable, functioning North Hall that can be used for all kinds of things, and most

importantly can be programmed for parties and fundraisers and Capitol Hill events and can actually raise money, be a revenue source for the total budget of the market. And there's no plan for that. The North Hall is open six weeks from tomorrow.

OYE YAA-ANNA: But this is unbelievable.

GALLO: Yes, it is unbelievable. There's no plan.

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GALLO: So I believe that they desperately need professional management at the Market and long-term planning and budgeting for the future that includes all of the operational costs as well as outreach activities. We need a website that's dedicated to Eastern Market. We need regular advertising for the Market. We need lots of special events to bring people to the Market. We need to program the North Hall to help raise revenue for the Market. Many, many things that we need, and as I see it not much of that is happening. There's a focus on getting the Market reopened, and then what? Instead of planning for the future of the Market, reopening it and implementing the plan. So, once again, I'm afraid that even though we're going to have a brand new building that's going to be pretty luxurious, it's still unclear right now how we're going to as of today even operate the outdoor markets because there are still issues that have been left unresolved about the outdoor markets. Whether Seventh Street in front of the Market is going to continue to be closed on the weekends or not. That's a huge issue with tremendous impacts on how to plan the future of Eastern Market. But that issue isn't even resolved yet.

So, as incredibly happy as I am to see the Market rise up out of the ashes, as grateful as I am for the city and all that they've done to re-establish the Market, to rebuild it, all the money that's been spent to rebuild the Market—as a business person there, I'm thankful to everybody for it and, I have to say, to the Capitol Hill Community Foundation for their support of the Market. But I'm concerned about the future, about how we're going to conduct business at the Market after it opens. I don't see any budget, I don't see any planning, I don't see professional management. I see a city agency that's trying hard to reopen the Market and keep things moving, but they're not professionals in market management, and I'm concerned about the rest of this year, and I'm concerned about the years to come.

OYE YAA-ANNA: But in your group, have you people strategized? What as a group have you people come up with? The vendors, because it's your livelihood. Those administrators are being paid.

GALLO: Until December 31 of last year, the vendors had no say in what was going on at the Market because the market management was so ineffective. It's only since the beginning of this year that the vendors have had more and more input into the activities, the planning and management of the Market. And the vendors, I think, as a whole were looking to a professional market manager to come and start all of the programs and planning that are critical [unintelligible]. They cancelled the RFP to bring in a new market management, a professional market management, and decided to do it themselves for now. It created a lot of concerns among all of the businesspeople, the vendors. And only in the last few weeks have the vendors been able to request meetings with the OPM market management in order to talk about the future. So, yeah, the vendors are very concerned. I think a lot of them are, mainly because we've all suffered for years now in our business [unintelligible] because of a lack of coherent management.

And so the vendors are now meeting. In fact, tonight, there's a meeting among the art and craft and flea market vendors with the Market manager to talk about a lot of different things, including the opening and after the opening. But here it is as of May 21, the Market opens in five or six weeks. These meetings should have been going on for a long time, and there should be a lot more planning under our belt instead of what I think is a last minute try to figure things out. The food merchants who are now in the temporary building are concerned about how the new building's going to work, so they're concerned. They're concerned about how they're going to move into the new building. The plan currently calls for a 10 day moving period for the food merchants, and there's a weekend in the ten days that the food merchants are going to be closed. The outdoor markets will still operate that weekend. So the food merchants have their concerns. The farmers have their concerns, and the outdoor arts and crafts and flea market vendors have also some concerns about how this thing is all going to work once it's all put back together. I don't know where you want to go from here.

OYE YAA-ANNA: You have challenges ahead of you. Let me ask you, during the Christmas holidays—you've had two since the fire—the Christmas after the fire, was it very different?

GALLO: I think everyone—food merchants, farmers, and the weekend exhibitors—will all agree that Christmas is the busiest time. From Thanksgiving to Christmas, people buy a lot of special food for the holidays, people buy gifts, people buy Christmas trees.

The thing that one has to understand about the weekend activities is that they are totally weather-dependent. So, here we are in the Christmas season, which everybody agrees is the busiest time of the year, and the time in Washington when we have the most challenging weather. So, if there's a period in November and December when the weekend weather is not very good, the Market suffers. So in addition to the weather issues, the last two Christmas seasons have been affected by the fire, the fact that Eastern

Market has been a construction site, the fact that there's only a temporary building for the food, the fact that the outdoor Market is sort of jerry-rigged, it's not set up in a rational way. So, yeah, the last two Christmas seasons have been pretty challenging. Now last year, the weather from Thanksgiving to Christmas on the weekends was horrible—rain, snow, freezing cold rain. So when you have the double whammy, the triple whammy of no management, a construction site, and bad weather, it can make for some pretty challenging Christmases.

OYE YAA-ANNA: You had the inauguration activities. Did that spike your ...

GALLO: I did not participate. It was too cold. It was frigidly cold during the weekend of the inauguration.

OYE YAA-ANNA: What is the future? The Market opens, everything is in place, maybe you will get a budget, maybe all of your wish list will be completed. What do you see as your future in the Market? Are you ever going to retire or will you just keep working until?

GALLO: I think that the Market itself will prosper in spite of all of the shortcomings because it always has. Because it has a loyal group of Capitol Hill patrons, it has a historic interest, it has a lot going for it. I'm saddened that there couldn't be more because there's the potential for a lot more with professional, rational management, with budgets, with event planning. There's a potential for a heck of a lot more and I'm hoping that potential will be realized.

For me personally, Eastern market is my livelihood. I get a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction in making things with my hands and selling them myself to people who, it's still unbelievable to me after 17 years, the people will spend their hard-earned money on something that I made that they like. I can't even begin to tell you how incredible that feeling is for me to have a customer who will see something that I've made that they like and decide that they want to buy it. And that happens every weekend that I go out there. Personally I'd be hard-pressed to describe it.

OYE YAA-ANNA: It's a fabulous high.

GALLO: It's an incredible feeling. And after 17 years, I have customers who come back again and again and again. And when I sit back and think about it, I'm just amazed that these people have faith and appreciate what I make with my own two hands. I'm a one-man operation, I don't have anybody who works for me, I don't sell any other place. Eastern Market is my life and my livelihood and it's been tremendously rewarding—the customers, and not to mention the friendships, both among the artists and exhibitors there and among the customers there have been tremendously fulfilling for me personally.

Yeah, I expect to eventually retire. The physical challenges of setting up and taking down my display every weekend day at the market can be overwhelming.

OYE YAA-ANNA: Taking its toll.

GALLO: And it has taken its toll. Over 17 years, getting older and older, and it gets harder and harder to do, so I think there'll come a time when I just can't physically do it any more. And when that time comes, I'll eventually hang it up and I'll miss it tremendously. I've never found another place where I get the kind of satisfaction that I do out of Eastern Market, both creating the work that I sell and interacting with thousands of people every month. Hundreds of people come and look at my work, comment on it, and choose to buy it. That's what the Market's been for me. When I moved to the city I lived on North Carolina Avenue for four years. I shopped at the Market every weekend. I moved six blocks away, continued to come to the Market. I left my professional work and decided to pursue my interest in arts and crafts, and Eastern Market was the rational, only place that made sense to me to try to make a living at this. And I've been there for 17 years, made a living at it, so it's very special to me.

OYE YAA-ANNA: This is a wonderful story and I want to thank you so much for sharing this with us because when we do this exhibit, people will get to understand that the Market is more than a market. It's the Hill, it is Capitol Hill, it is Washington, the Capitol city, it is America.

GALLO: Yes, and Eastern Market provides a livelihood, in my opinion, for hundreds of people—the vendors, the food merchants, the farmers and their employees and their staffs and their children and their families. It's a unique business engine that went through a horribly challenging period and is now coming out of that period and can only grow better and better over time.

OYE YAA-ANNA: And you are there with the experience to help them grow, and I'm sure you will because what else can you do but continue to give it your best as you have given it all these years.

GALLO: That's right. Thank you Vera for inviting me to tell my story and to talk about the Market.

OYE YAA-ANNA: Thank you. And have a wonderful day.

END OF INTERVIEW